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Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

# **The Role of Evil in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories**

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Bakalářská práce se bude věnovat literární analýze prosaické tvorby Edgara Allana Poa. Zaměří se zejména na pojetí zla, přičemž se pokusí nabídnout odpověď na otázku, zdali užitím zla coby prostředku uměleckého ztvárnění sleduje Poe estetický nebo etický požadavek.

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## **ANNOTATION**

The thesis deals with the role of evil in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories. The main points of the thesis are demonstrated on three short stories, *The Imp of Perverse*, *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Hop Frog*. It analyses the behavior and personality of the main characters, the results of the analysis based on the philosophical view of evil and literary context and characterization of the genre.

## **KEYWORDS**

evil, Edgar Allan Poe, gothic novel, literature

## **NÁZEV**

Role zla v díle Edgara Allana Poea

## **ANOTACE**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rolí zla v povídkách Edgara Allana Poea. Hlavní body této práce jsou demonstrovány na třech povídkách, jmenovitě Démon zvrácenosti, Sud vína Amontilladského a Skokan. Tato práce analyzuje chování a charakter hlavních postav a její výsledky jsou založené na filozofickém náhledu na zlo, literárním kontextu a charakteristice žánru.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

zlo, Edgar Allan Poe, gotický román, literatura

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## 0 Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most famous American writers of all time. He influenced generations of writers and inspired so many iconic literary works which remained significant until today. He became one of the first authors of gothic fiction and his genius writing style, together with his logical construction of his work and unique imagination, made him seem almost futuristic for the readers of his era. His works are still relevant to this day, establishing a stepping stone for writers of the genre or popular film makers to build on. He used number of gruesome and horrifying themes in his work, which amazed the reader and arose many different emotions in them. Poe captured their attention with decrepitated manors, mysterious occurrences, feelings of loss, mourning or appreciation for their loved ones and at the same time, the readers got fascinated by horrendous and shocking murders. He used many different ways to convey the message he intended to pass onto his readers, switching between subtle indications and more direct approach.

This bachelor thesis focuses on depiction of evil in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and how it is supposed to influence the reader and his view of the world. It is going to analyze his approach to story-telling and using different imagery he depicted in his stories, which could be interpreted as metaphors to encourage the reader to contemplate different meanings behind the settings and how they mirror or influence the characters and their story. The thesis is going to characterize the problem of evil, theodicy and different solutions that the philosophers came up with to explain the conflict between existence of God and existence of evil. Further in the next part it is going to briefly summarize literary background and influence Edgar Allan Poe had, which events could have influence him and his work and briefly summarize his contemporary writers. In practical part, three chosen short stories will be used as an example for analyzing Poe's actual content and meaning behind it, the examples being *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Hop Frog* and *The Imp of Perverse*. There is going to be a characterization of the main motives used in those stories, brief summary of main characteristics that made the characters act the way they acted and revealing all the underlying feelings that allowed the characters to commit what they did.

# 1 Theoretical part

## 1.1. Evil

Ever since people started creating societies, they had the urge to evaluate whether or not deeds that had been committed can be considered good or evil. Most of the time the main reason for evaluating them was religion and the rules inflicted by it. For example, according to William C. Williams, Christianity recognizes two types of evil – moral and natural one. A person commits moral evil if they knowingly decide to do anything they should have not done. This deed is also usually considered to be a sin. In the past it was also common that society was not determining whether someone's actions were evil or not, it was up to God to decide. Williams believes that moral evil has a root in disobedience, whether it is intentional or not. Apparently, sins and evil as defined in Christianity were firstly committed in the Old Testament by Satan, who became the ultimate synonym for the evilest being ever.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the physical evil could be, according to David Roberts Dungan, basically a punishment cast upon sinners by God to change their ways and become better people.<sup>2</sup>

Ever since people got affected by tragic events which changed their life dramatically, they started to ask "Why would God allow this to happen if He truly is almighty and all-knowing?" This dubiety is called Theodicy and it is one of the most serious problems for religious people. According to Daniel Lim, this conflict is caused by one of the core beliefs in monotheistic religions called God's providence – the notion that God is the reason why everything happens in the world and that He is the one who actively causes all the events. This belief is heavily supported in sacred texts, for example Baptist texts explicitly call God the one who rules all the living creatures in the world and whose commands the creatures cannot disobey. However, by admitting that there indeed are evil deeds committed in the world, *Problem of Evil* arises. According to Lim, this conflict was defined by many philosophers and therefore the term cannot be used with definite article. However, all those hypotheses are based

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Williams, "Evil," Bible Study Tools, accessed on February 12, 2018, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/evil/>.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, "Evil."



on the fact that the existence of evil heavily contradicts the belief of God's providence and, therefore, can be used as a prove that God does not exist, or at least that God's existence is extremely unlikely. On the other hand, the philosophers concluded that even with existence of evil, the belief in God's existence can be preserved using the assumption that God is not actually governing everything that happens but just allows people to do what they want.

Michael Tooley in his *The Problem of Evil* claims that people use the phenomenon of Theodicy to prove that God cannot exist if evil exists. However, in his opinion, it cannot be generally said whether is reasonable to believe in God or not because it depends on number of other factors, not only on the hypothesis that God who is considered to be good and evil cannot exist at the same time. Their arguments which are used to refute the hypothesis are the following: there is no proven reason why God and evil are mutually exclusive and that it is entirely possible that a greater omnipotent being would have a valid moral reason to cause evil actions.<sup>3</sup> Probably one of the best-known evil entities is Satan. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, Satan is actually permitted to test human goodness to an extent, which was set by God<sup>4</sup>, which on the other hand means that he cannot be truly classified as evil because he is not deliberately evil, he is simply doing his job he was assigned by God.

As stated in The Catholic Encyclopedia, evil is inevitable part of human life. Christians believe that it can be destroyed by increasing experience of the mankind and learning. However, there is a more skeptical approach which claims that some amount of evil cannot be banished by any means. The reasoning behind acts of evil vary from person to person, however, according to Roy F. Baumeister and W. Keith Campbell, it can be divided into three main categories. First reason to commit evil deed is simply human temptation to commit something forbidden, the motivation to act this way is inside

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<sup>3</sup> "The Problem of Evil," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed on February 14, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#ResArgEviRefDefThe>.

<sup>4</sup> "Satan," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed on February 15, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Satan>.

the person. The other ones are being driven by external motives, such as to gain material possessions and fame or lastly, evil acts in the name of one's ideals.<sup>5</sup>

According to The Encyclopedia, the Christian description of evil differs from the others in three main points. Firstly, Christians claim that God is absolutely omnipotent and good, and even though if that was the case, He would be the one who permits the existence of evil. Secondly, the main reason for evil and suffering of humans is their own sins and the third relevant aspect is the assertion that God's permission of evil acts is beneficial to mankind, while admitting that God is fully capable of preventing those acts if He chose to do so. Those points, together with the freedom of will, must be taken into consideration<sup>6</sup> while contemplating existence of God and evil at the same time.

## 1.2. Historical-literal background

### 1.2.1. Historical Era

Without a doubt, Poe's literary work was not only influenced by other writers, but also by the society and events which are now considered to be historical. During Poe's life, there were many significant milestones happening in the US. One of them was for example Monroe Doctrine. It was created in 1823 and according to an extract from *Milestone Documents*, this policy basically shaped the whole historical development of the United States. The Doctrine was created to stop establishment of new European colonies in America and on the other hand, it claimed that the independent states would not interfere with existing colonies.<sup>7</sup> This policy helped the US to distance themselves further from its former colonizers and to strengthen its position in the world. Another important historical event happening in the US was without a doubt Mexican-American War in 1846 – 1848. According to historians from [www.history.com](http://www.history.com), this

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<sup>5</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and W. Keith Campbell, "The Intrinsic Appeal of Evil: Sadism, Sensational Thrills, and Threatened Egoism," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1999): 210–221.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Sharpe, "Evil," The Catholic Encyclopedia, accessed on February 15, 2018, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05649a.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> "Monroe Doctrine (1823)," The National Archives and Records Administration, accessed on February 18, 2018, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=23#>.

War was caused by "manifest destiny" - the U.S. President James K. Polk (1845 – 1849) believed that the USA was destined to connect Pacific and Atlantic Ocean. Mexico was not prepared for armed conflict and lost about third of its territory, consisting of California, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico and Arizona.<sup>8</sup> This acquisition of new states allowing slavery in the Federation rose the tension within the nation which influenced the whole population, including the writers.

### 1.2.2. Literary Context, Contemporary Writers and Influence

Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 in Boston. His life was filled with tragic events which influenced and inspired his works, the main ones including death of his parents, illness and subsequent death of his beloved wife Virginia and additionally, his alcoholism. These events are often occurring in his works, for example in *Raven* the main protagonist mourns death of Lenore, the woman he loved. Another example that can be used as a proof of these influences is his famous short story *The Masque of the Red Death*. This story was written shortly after his wife died of tuberculosis and therefore, it is no surprise that the plot of the story is running away from the plague and failing. Another important event which shaped his life was moving with his foster parents to England. It is a common assumption that these events and the atmosphere of England inspired his plots and even shaped his writing style. Poe's writing style differed from majority of his contemporary writers.

Literature experts were researching Poe's life and events that influenced his development, however, their findings were usually only based on the correspondence with or about Poe. Erica Giammarco managed to create Poe's possible psychological profile. According to her, he was definitely highly neurotic, which can be proved by his anxiety and melancholy. Poe was also very irritable and argumentative and did not have much self-control, which would explain his drinking problem and frequent fights with authorities he got himself into. It is almost impossible to claim whether Poe was an introvert or extrovert, given the fact that he was definitely not good-natured

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<sup>8</sup> "Mexican-American War," History.com, accessed on February 12, 2018, <http://www.history.com/topics/mexican-american-war>.

but at the same time was able to be assertive and vocal in his professional life. For Giammarco was also difficult to determine whether Poe was disciplined and hard-working individual. He wrote many poems and stories but one might argue that this is something that Poe did not need to put an effort into, because of his natural talent. Giammarco confirms Poe's indiscipline, claiming that for him writing was more of a mean of therapy than a chore. Giammarco supports this notion by the fact that Poe was writing more during times of difficulty, for example around death of Virginia, his wife. It is also broadly believed that Poe suffered from depression his whole life. He was often described as melancholic and moreover, he always claimed to be tormented or gloomy. This could be an explanation for the themes he used in his stories, such as dark atmosphere or commonly occurring death.<sup>9</sup>

Given the historical era, Poe and his contemporary writers aimed to create original native literature works. According to Morris Dickstein, James R. Giles and other experts from Encyclopædia Britannica, probably the most prominent statures amongst Poe who ignited the change in the American literature were William C. Bryant, Washington Irving and James F. Cooper.<sup>10</sup> William Cullen Bryant first became known in 1817 when his first poem got published. As stated in Britannica, *Thanatopsis*, how the poem was called, was still heavily inspired by the works of 18<sup>th</sup> century poets from England.<sup>11</sup> His later literary pieces broke free from the English influence and dealt with different topics. According to an extract from *William Cullen Bryant: An American Voice* by Frank Gado, his other works, for example the essay *On the Happy Temperament* claimed that constant happiness and cheerfulness is insensitive. Bryant tried to convince the reader and himself that death and other negative experience in life are inevitable and happening just to make people appreciate the "wild delight of life".<sup>12</sup>

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9 Erica Giammarco, "Edgar Allan Poe: A psychological profile", *Personality and Individual Differences* Vol. 54, Issue 1 (January 2013): Pages 3–6.

<sup>10</sup> "American Literature," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed on February 20, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/art/American-literature/The-19th-century>.

<sup>11</sup> "American Literature."

<sup>12</sup> Frank Gado, "William Cullen Bryant: An American Voice," accessed on February 19, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-cullen-bryant>.

According to Britannica, Bryant was quickly overshadowed by Washington Irving. His first work described regime in New York established by the Dutch in a hilarious way. However, he stopped writing after a tragedy occurred in his personal life. His next work was named *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* It is a collection of fiction and facts in the form of satirical short stories and essays. Even though majority of this literary work was inspired and aimed at England and Europe in general, part of it deals with topic which were relevant in the US. Two of the short stories, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*, became the most famous amongst the public. Both of those are based on old German tales. For example, *Rip Van Winkle* tells a story of a man who had been sleeping for 20 years and woke up to new world where the US were an independent country. These two tales became known as the first short stories to be truly American.<sup>13</sup>

Another important writer of the era was James Fenimore Cooper (1789 – 1851). According to George G. Dekker, he became known as the first prominent American novelist. At first, he only imitated famous English writers such as Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott but in his third novel *The Spy* he broke that habit – the novel was set during American War of Independence and introduced characters with typically American characteristics and beliefs. In his other novels he explored conflict between two versions of American paradise. There was paradise created by God which was raw and wild and on the other hand, there was a picture of cultivated and spruce garden. He was able to describe this conflict in a way that resonated with his readers and fit the mood in the society.<sup>14</sup>

Poe lived in the era when his contemporary writers focused more on criticizing society and its habits, like for example Ralph Waldo Emerson and his work *Nature*. The essay built the foundation for Transcendentalism, the philosophical movement. Emerson claimed that reality can be understood through nature, as well as God and divine. According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, another important belief

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<sup>13</sup> "Washington Irving," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed on February 20, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Washington-Irving>.

<sup>14</sup> "James Fenimore Cooper," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed on February 20, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Fenimore-Cooper>.

of Transcendentalism is that people were the best when they were self-reliant because the institutions and society in general destroy everything which is good in people. However, transcendentalists, as well as Poe, put the emphasis on feelings and intuition.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.2.3. Edgar Allan Poe's Influence

Poe himself without a doubt overshadowed all of the authors mentioned above in the long term. Although not exactly famous in contemporary US, his work influenced many future writers and it also resonated within the atmosphere of contemporary Europe. He contributed to shaping American Gothic genre, as well as creating the genre of Detective stories. Poe published few stories with a plot revolving around solving murders or other detective mysteries. One of the most famous one became for sure *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. In this short story Poe introduced private detective called Dupin, who became an inspiration to Sir Arthur C. Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Dupin basically has the same traits and characteristics as Holmes. For example, he also relies solely on logical thinking and only has one real friend, who is in fact the narrator of the story. Not only Poe's work influenced other writers and created whole another genre, he is still an important part of culture nowadays. The short stories he wrote inspired many writers, mainly from Europe.

As mentioned, Poe's works were accepted better in Europe, namely in France and consequently Russia. The most famous French writer influenced by E. A. Poe is probably Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire recognized Poe's incredible talent and imagination and decided to introduce Poe to France. Therefore, Baudelaire became Poe's propagator and translator in Europe and according to Chiabrandi, he spent astonishing sixteen years of his life on translating Poe's complete work into French, which became a masterpiece in a similar fashion as Poe's work today.<sup>16</sup> He wrote number of essays about Poe's writing style and his life. Baudelaire describes Poe's life

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<sup>15</sup> "Transcendentalism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed on February 20, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ada Pierina Chiabrandi, "The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Charles Baudelaire," accessed on February 21, 2018, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/142049312.pdf>.

and tries to thoroughly understand what Poe tried to convey in his poems and stories. As an example, we can mention passage of Baudelaire's essay where he focuses on women in Poe's work. He concludes that Poe's relationship with women was filled with chivalry – not once in his work he describes women as desirable object for physical love but rather like angels, otherworldly creatures that he is not able to touch, he can just admire them from afar. Poe considered women's love and their beauty one of the pillars of happiness.<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire also expresses his admiration and characterizes Poe's writing style. He describes Poe's poems as harmonic and deep and at the same time crystal clear and elaborate, which carefully and peacefully shows the reader its goal. Poe's writing style is defined as formal and rather slow so the reader can truly understand the brilliant mix of madness and intellect Poe created with his deductions and hypotheses. Baudelaire compliments Poe's ability to narrate various deviations of nature and people and about absurdity, which dominates characters' common sense and creates further hysteria and conflicts. Poe further analyses phantoms which cannot be measured and scientifically describes details which can influence sensitive person and lead them to evil. Baudelaire believed that Poe's writing style was a sign of either great genius, which is not used fully, or deeply repressed sensitivity. Baudelaire also analyses Poe's characters. The main one is usually troubled, very talented, although with weak nerves. The interests of the main character are usually women who are terminally ill with unknown disease. They are commonly knowledgeable, passionate and depressed. Baudelaire concludes that all of these characters and their characteristics are Poe – they mirror Poe's values and ideals.<sup>18</sup>

Poe's work is still relevant to this day. Modern popular culture and film industry often get inspired by Poe's short stories and poems. To mention just a few examples, one of the most popular and current ones was possibly *The Raven* (2012) directed by James McTeague.<sup>19</sup> Even though the movie was named after the most famous poem by Poe, it merges his well-known short stories together in one mystery detective plot filled with horror. The film was inspired by *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Murders in*

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Úvahy o některých současnících*, transl. by Jan Vladislav (Praha: Odeon, 1968), 270–271.

<sup>18</sup> Baudelaire, *Úvahy o některých současnících*, 274–276.

<sup>19</sup> "The Raven," IMDb, accessed on February 21, 2018, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1486192/?ref\\_=ttawd\\_awd\\_tt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1486192/?ref_=ttawd_awd_tt).

*the Rue Morgue* or by *The Mask of the Red Death*. *The Raven* also tells its own story about Poe's mysterious death which was never fully explained. Another popular movie based on Poe's work was *The Stonehearst Asylum*. This film is based on the plot of *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether*. Even though these movies are the best-known adaptations of Poe's literary work, they were not the first ones to get inspired by it. According to website Taste of Cinema, silent movie *The Fall of the House of Usher* (directed by Jean Epstein, 1928) based on the short story of the same name could be used as an illustration of older movies heavily influenced by E. A. Poe.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.3. Gothic Novel

Gothic novel was without a doubt inspired by architecture of the era. Literature went through changes the same way human beliefs, struggles or buildings did. It was the time of verticality and rising above the human world. Even though it was not easy to live during that time, Gothic era, its architecture and feelings it casted upon the spectator became a source of inspiration to writers and artists in general. According to experts from Encyclopedia Britannica, the first fiction which could be marked as Gothic appeared in 18th century. It tried to stand against Rationalism through depiction of mystery, horror and wonder. Its other typical features are dark, ghostly atmosphere full of madness, superstition and revenge. However, Gothic fiction was not created to cause true terror to the reader but to entertain him thanks to those emotions.<sup>21</sup>

The fiction was supposed to oppose the voice of reason and show that not everything needs to have logical explanation. It should simply make the reader feel some emotion, negative or positive, with the setting of the fiction described in great detail or through gruesome experiences the characters go through. Gothic novel was created with different characteristics than any literature genre had had before. Firstly, it gives the same importance to the setting as it gives to the plot. The authors created well-

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew Benbenek, "The 10 Best Horror Movies Based on The Works of Edgar Allan Poe," accessed on February 21, 2018, <http://www.tasteofcinema.com/2015/the-10-best-horror-movies-based-on-the-works-of-edgar-allan-poe/2/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Novel," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed on February 19, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/art/novel/Types-of-novel#ref503978>.



depicted manors or castles which they used to set the dark atmosphere full of suspense. These manors were used as the embodiment of mystery and wonder, which were other typical theme used in Gothic literature. These features firstly appeared in *The Castle of Oranto* by Horace Walpole which was published in 1765. It introduced features such as suspense or even supernatural entities – the story features ghouls and ghosts. The story displays strong emotions, such as envy, tyranny and sorrow. It also features all the other characteristics mentioned above which is why *The Castle of Oranto* became the iconic tutorial for Gothic literature.<sup>22</sup> According to M. H. Abrams, *The Castle of Oranto* also set an example for future writers of the genre in the setting of their works. Walpole set his story in Medieval times and therefore many writers decided to set their novels in Medieval times as well, moreover in Catholic countries such as Italy or Spain.<sup>23</sup> Poe also followed this trend, for example in his story *The Pit and the Pendulum*, which is set in Toledo, Spain. The plot of this story is also fueled by Spanish Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* Poe followed a different stereotype of the genre - the story takes place in a decrepitated manor where mysterious noises start to occur later in the story. Poe used them to build cathartic suspense which is consequently resolved by the revelation that those noises were in fact made by sister of the manor's owner, who was buried alive. Another interesting notion Abrams mentions is that in this genre female writers are fairly common and successful. He debates whether women's inclination towards darker type of literature can be seen as a consequence of repressed sexuality or simply as challenging established hierarchy in the genre and literature in general.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.3.1. American Gothic

The subgenre of Gothic Novel occurring in The United States of America is called American Gothic. According to Allan Lloyd Smith, American Gothic started very similar way to the beginnings of Gothic fiction in Europe. He claims that both of these genres were thought to be some kind of offshoot of the mainstream literature, meaning

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<sup>22</sup> "The Castle of Oranto," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed on February 20, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Castle-of-Otranto>.

<sup>23</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th Edition* (USA: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 110–112, [https://mthoyibi.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/a-glossary-of-literary-terms-7th-ed\\_m-h-abrams-1999.pdf](https://mthoyibi.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/a-glossary-of-literary-terms-7th-ed_m-h-abrams-1999.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th Edition*, 110–112.

that Gothic fiction sprouted from realistic literature, which was considered to be more respectable, whereas according to literary critiques, American Gothic was assumed to be just an offshoot of the traditional writing, using only imitation and eccentricity to differ from the mainstream literature. Even though Smith admits that some similarities within the genres can be seen, he claims that American writers decided to carve their own path. They did not simply change the settings of the existing gothic novels to suit their taste, they use their unique background and social values to create very different works, which were unlike any others. Lloyd lists many different influences which had an impact on American writers, such as the everlasting thread of solitude and consequently violence, which were connected to the fact that the USA were founded in the remote part of the world, which was yet to be fully explored. Another important factors which played a big role were racial issues, connected both to slavery and concerning Native Americans as well. Those were circumstances which could not possibly occur in Europe, together with the fact that the population of the newly founded USA could be considered anxious and confounded by the unprecedented democratic state system.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps these are the factors that allow American writers to be, according to Abrams, one of the best and most numerous group of writers pursuing their writing in this genre.<sup>26</sup>

Smith further characterizes the genre by describing its features. According to him, it is typical to find extremes such as fear, cruelty or passion, which often lead the characters to test their limitations. However, at least in the end of their stories the gothic writers usually let their characters to appropriate themselves to the cultural norm of morality. Gothic writers use their platform to create works which are very negative to contrast the optimism of the public.<sup>27</sup> However, their negativity allowed people to consider public decisions without bias and with open mind, showing that not everything that is said to be the best for people is really the best option, it can only be the easily maintained one by the society. Smith elaborates that the characters usually believe themselves to be superior because of their rationality, whereas other characters are blinded by their faith and trust in the others, who they let think and consequently decide

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<sup>25</sup> Allan Lloyd Smith, "American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction," accessed on June 1, 2018, [http://americainclass.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Smith\\_American\\_Gothic.pdf](http://americainclass.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Smith_American_Gothic.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th Edition, 110–112.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, "American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction."

for them. The perspective in the genre is strictly divided – people either act morally or immorally and are either good or evil, nothing in between. The popular character development in the genre includes either good person who behaved immorally or straight up evil person, who undergoes a major change through the story and in the end ends up punished for their actions, in conclusion, redeemed in the eyes of the public and God.<sup>28</sup>

Smith further claims that another important feature occurring in the genre is supernatural and along with it, science. Ghosts and other mysterious occurrences are fairly commonly used by the writers, however, along with more scientific discoveries they are able to connect science and the supernatural and therefore explain the mysterious incidents. Smith explains that these features are often used together with religious offences, demonism, occultism and even necromancy. As mentioned, new scientific discoveries implemented in the literary works is often used to explain supernatural occurrences, however, it is also the reason why the writers can use different phenomena, which were never seen before and therefore their origin remains unknown. These characteristics allowed the writers to feature unique characters in their stories, such as mad scientists. They usually let the scientists push the science too far and draw the connection between scientific research and occultism, showing possible consequences of trying to change the natural order of things. This goes together with the writers' passion for medieval architecture. They frequently use hidden chambers, secret doors and corridors, Smith theorizes that their fascination can be rooted in their appreciation of their inheritance and deep dislike of industrialization and growing commercialism and consumerism. On the other hand, he also expresses concern that their fascination was also inflicted by their fear of the era which is symbolized by these buildings and therefore they use these types of buildings to cast the same feelings onto the reader.<sup>29</sup>

This use of setting and architecture to inflict emotions is strongly tied with the type of emotion the writer wants to expose the reader to. For example, it is easier to create

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, "American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction."

<sup>29</sup> Smith, "American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction."

the feeling of fear and isolation in decrepitated mansion in the middle of nowhere instead of in the well-maintained house located on the main square of the city. Poe himself was a master of drawing connections between the visual scenery and the states of mind of the characters. For example, the Ushers in *The Fall in the House of Usher* live in a wore down mansion, which correlates with how the owners of the house feel. The same similarity can be seen in *The Cask of Amontillado*, Montresor started as respected citizen and therefore the short story begins on the street in the middle of the carnival, where everything is pompous and full of joy. As the story progresses, he and Fortunato pass through the mansion and as Montresor presses and manipulates Fortunato further, they descend into the humid cellar, which is filled with mold and saltpeter, presumably symbolizing the descend of Montresor mind.

According to Smith, in American Gothic and gothic fiction in general it is important to distinguish between horror and terror. Even though these two are closely related, each of them has different impact on the reader. For the most readers, the difference between these two is too subtle to distinguish. Throughout the whole story, the reader should be experiencing terror caused by the possibility of what might happen at the end or by the lingering feeling of what might be happening at the moment but what the character is not currently aware of, even though the horrific events are subtly hinted throughout the whole story. In well-crafted story, these two states need to be intervened and often switched between. To simplify, we could say that terror is mainly caused by something unseen, which might not be even happening or real, whereas horror is rooted more in stuff which is more real and present. American gothic writers usually used their writing to express their feelings about real problems in their society. Gothic writers usually displayed themes of women oppression and other topics related to patriarchy-oriented society, whereas the American writers shifted the common real-life topic in a slightly different direction. More important topic to cover for them was definitely slavery, distrust and basically fear of Native Americans and later on, the feeling of guilt because of Native American genocide. According to Smith, Poe was a master in hinting serious topics, coating them in topics more traditional for gothic literature. As an example, he lists the plot of *The Black Cat*, where the woman

gets killed and buried behind the wall by the man. Smith believes that this could be read as a symbol of women oppression, domestic violence and signs of slavery.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Smith, "American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction."

## 2 Practical part

Poe's work displayed topics which were considered unusual or even shocking by the readers. In majority of his stories the reader will encounter characters haunted by lost love, hatred, characters driven to insanity by their feelings of guilt over committed deeds in the heat of the moment or those which were planned and committed in cold blood. Poe uses those actions of these madmen to create terrific stories which influenced generations of literary writers and therefore became one of the symbols of Gothic genre, setting an example for aspiring writers and other artists. Evil deeds are common occurrence in Poe's work, even though he always used different approach to them. His characters have completely different motivations and even though their actions can look the same, by examining them further we could conclude their root is commonly completely different for every character.

In practical part, this bachelor thesis focuses on three famous short stories by Edgar Allan Poe – *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Hop Frog* and *The Imp of Perverse*, which all have the same main plot point in them. The main characters of those stories committed murder, even though they all had very different motives. All of these characters planned their modus operandi thoroughly, without contemplating whether their actions are necessary and the best solution to their problems. This part of the thesis will examine what message was Poe trying to convey and what other implications he implemented into his stories and how they could possibly be understood by the reader. There will be analysis of the behavior of the characters and their motivations, exploring different outcomes of the stories and their impact Edgar Allan Poe could have meant for his stories to inflict on his readers.

### 2.1. Revenge and Consequences

One of the most common theme occurring in Poe's stories is revenge and consequences of person's deeds. These topics are both displayed in *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Hop Frog* and will be the crucial part in the analytical part of this bachelor thesis. Both of these short stories were published near the end of Poe's life only three years apart,

in 1846 and 1849. They both can be found in Poe's book *The Pit and the Pendulum*, as well as in other collections of his short stories. Both of these stories take place presumably in the first world country, sometime in the Medieval Era, which only further prove and show the fascination by those times, societies and architecture which was typical for the writers of the gothic genre. Characters in both of these stories are from upper society classes, one of them even royalty. Both main characters have some cruelty hidden under their everyday façade which came up after they lost their patience. They both were also very cunning with their plans, thoroughly contemplating every single possible outcome to achieve their ends and to prevent failing or getting caught. Both of the main characters are male, showing great pride in their reputation and dignity, which causes them to lose their temper easily if somebody pushes them too far.

*The Cask of Amontillado* takes place in Italy and is narrated in the first person. The story has a feature which used to be very unique – it is narrated by the murderer, the same way as Poe's most famous stories, for example *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-tale Heart*. The main plot point of *The Cask of Amontillado* is revenge of the main protagonist called Montresor to his friend Fortunato, who deeply insulted the protagonist. Montresor decided to punish the deed and manipulates Fortunato into entering the dungeons with him by "reluctantly" letting him taste the rare Amontillado wine. While Fortunato does not suspect anything and does not care about anything else than Amontillado, Montresor lures him to the deepest chamber in the dungeons and there he finishes his act of revenge – he chains Fortunato to the wall and then seals off the chamber, leaving his former friend to die slowly in order to fulfill his plan of revenge.

In his short stories, Poe put the same amount of emphasis on the setting of the story as he did on the plot and characters themselves. This fact can be easily demonstrated on *The Cask of Amontillado* and the change of setting as the story progresses. Poe's typical setting was named by Martin Hilský as Poe's room or Poe's house. Every single object and room serve a purpose and emphasizes the inner dialogue and turmoil the main character is going through. Poe's rooms are usually manor-like, filled with

luxurious furniture, antiquities, and artifacts from exotic countries. Another typical feature of his rooms is that their curtains are always drawn, so there is no natural light coming in and therefore the only light is made by artificial light sources created by human hand. Poe's houses generally reflect the state of mind of his characters.<sup>31</sup> The most prominent example of this technique is *The Fall of the House of Usher*. This short story uses the manor it takes place in as a mirror image of its owner's mental state. Both the manor and the owner's mind decrepitate over the course of the story and both end up destroyed in the finale of the short story. More importantly, all of this is displayed in *The Cask of Amontillado* as well. The story begins at dusk in the streets of an Italian town in the middle of the Carnival. The main characters move swiftly through this introductory part to enter Poe's house. Montresor's palace is a luxurious building filled with servants, which shows his wealth and social status, however, at the moment of their arrival, his servants left the house to join the Carnival. This is another important change of the setting. Even though the environment is still pompous and civilized, the characters are the only living beings in it. Poe's Montresor emphasizes the solitude of the characters by noting the following:

“There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honor of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.”<sup>32</sup>

The characters slowly make their way through the abandoned manor into the cellar, which is not only abandoned by people but also in a worse condition than the rest of the mansion. To increase the atmosphere even further, the bone-chilling nature of Montresor's plan is mirrored by the appearance of the dungeon: “Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris.”<sup>33</sup> Their journey ends in the deepest part of the dungeons, in the utmost darkness, where Montresor finally fulfills his evil plan to end Fortunato's life. The gradual change of the setting could be easily interpreted as a mirror of Montresor's

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Hilský, “Povídkář Poe,” *In Jáma a kyvadlo a jiné povídky* (Praha: Odeon, 1978), 433. (My translation)

<sup>32</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, „The Cask of Amontillado,” accessed on September 25, 2018, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/poe/cask.html>.

<sup>33</sup> „The Cask of Amontillado.”



character – in the beginning of the short story, he pretends to like Fortunato, while he is secretly plotting his downfall. As the story progresses, Montresor stops caring about his image, his mask comes off, so Fortunato can finally see his true colors and how he is filled with hatred towards Fortunato. However, even though Poe allows the reader to learn Montresor's goal and all of his motivation behind it, he delivers the facts in a way that could be described almost as scientific, without any implications of judgement Poe himself felt for his character or without suggesting how the reader should feel about the choices Montresor, or any other Poe's character, for that matter, made and the consequences these choices had in the rest of the story.

Both Fortunato and Montresor are described as wine enthusiasts from the social upper class. Their other similarity is they both tend to get passionate about something and do not stop to consider possible consequences – we can see this behavior in Montresor's revenge plan, he does not think whether murdering and tormenting his former friend is the appropriate reaction to Fortunato's offence. On the other hand, Fortunato displays similar traits. Once he learned Montresor owns Amontillado, he basically forces him to let him investigate whether it is really Amontillado or not. That became his only concern and he completely ignores the facts that he was supposed to join his friends to celebrate Carnival and that he has an illness which will get worse in humid dungeons full of saltpeter in Montresor's mansion. These men also think high of themselves – both pride themselves to be knowledgeable about wine, Montresor cannot stand to be offended and Fortunato believes that he is better than others, which can be proven by the fact that according to Montresor, Fortunato was offending him many times before it climaxed with the insult. Another proof that Fortunato is rather bigheaded character is his unwillingness to let another wine enthusiast to taste and determine whether the cask is full of real Amontillado or if Montresor was tricked. Montresor is aware of Fortunato's character; therefore, he uses his traits to manipulate him and make him follow his plan perfectly. We could also claim that Fortunato is not only bigheaded but I personally would describe him as rather shallow. I believe that he only considers Montresor his friend because they are from the same social class. He is interested in Montresor's coat of arms, which is a symbol of wealth and social status. Moreover, he acted rather disappointed when he learned that Montresor was not

a member of Freemasons. This would give Fortunato the edge over Montresor and therefore he would feel justified to look down on Montresor and make fun of him.

The second short story which is going to be analyzed in this part of the thesis is *The Hop Frog*. In contrast with *The Cask of Amontillado*, this short story is written in the third person point of view. As well as the first short story, the main point of *The Hop Frog* is revenge. Hop-Frog is a nickname for the main protagonist, which was given to him by the king. The king could be considered the villain of the story. He is the one who owns Hop-Frog and regularly humiliates him with the help of his ministers, taking advantage of Hop-Frog's weaknesses. The king takes pride in being the funniest person in his kingdom, however, he is not capable of making any sophisticated jokes so he and his ministers use simple pranks and humiliation as a way to appear funny and be popular among people at the court. Another important shaping characteristics of his is, in my opinion, his sadism and entitlement. The king does not hesitate to use other people weaknesses or triggers for his own amusement. One of the examples is when he forces Hop-Frog to drink alcohol, even though he knows he does not handle it well and that it makes him irresponsible and angry. The king also cannot handle if anyone tries to object to his orders or criticize them. In that case he becomes violent and does not think his actions through. We can observe this kind of behavior when Trippetta, dwarfish beautiful dancer, stands up to him and defends her friend Hop-Frog. The king becomes enraged by her behavior and throws his drink into her face. Trippetta is the only character we know of that has positive relationship with Hop-Frog. In my opinion, she is supposed to represent Hop-Frog's home country, family and friends that he lost and therefore the king's behavior towards her was the final straw for Hop-Frog. He himself can be characterized as quick-witted, athletic and creative. However, under all of this the reader can sense underlying rage and hatred aimed at people who kidnapped him from his home country. One could argue whether his reaction to Trippetta's humiliation can or cannot be perceived as an act of chivalrousness or if it was only the last straw that made Hop-Frog come up with a plan to avenge the king's behavior towards them. He uses his wit and Trippetta's abilities to trick the king and his ministers into fulfilling his idea of making them dress as apes to prank other people at the court. They create their costumes from inflammable materials and let Hop-Frog chain them together, to appear as accurate as possible. Little did they know that Hop-

Frog chained them together to hang them on the chandelier and set them on fire to punish their behavior towards him and Trippetta as his last joke at the court.

As stated, the main topic of these stories is vengeance. Both of the main characters suffered serious offence or even torment from the hands of the "antagonists" of their respective stories. Both of the characters decided to fight back from seemingly different reasons. Montresor was pushed to his deed by his pride while Hop Frog by all the abuse and discrimination he received from the king and his ministers. However, Poe does not judge his characters, he simply shares their emotions and thoughts with the reader. The characters do not realize their behavior is evil and immoral, they simply have an urge to act which needs to be fulfilled, this is the way they have to deal with all the injustice, torment and the way to get the things back in order. This is demonstrated in *The Cask of Amontillado* by Montresor's behavior – he simply cannot ignore Fortunato's words, even though he was satisfied with his life, he was rich and popular. However, once Fortunato humiliated him and degraded him in his own eyes, everything else vanished and became unimportant. Montresor only cares about revenge against Fortunato, even though these two were good friends with very similar values and background. We could say that Montresor basically forgets everything good about Fortunato, exaggerates his previous offences and wrongdoings against him and decides that Fortunato is a vicious being, his nemesis.

In contrast, Hop-Frog's motives are fairly different. Even though he is regularly humiliated by the king and his ministers, he obeys and takes it because of hierarchy. However, he lost his patience after the king humiliated and hurt also Trippetta. Another important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration while contemplating whether we can confirm Hop-Frog to be the one who is to be blamed for everything he done and that is slavery. Hop-Frog was unwillingly taken from his home land and was forced to join the king's court, along with Trippetta. Trippetta was allowed to blend into the group of king's vassals more easily, in my opinion because she was attractive and was not disfigured. Hop-Frog was usually used as a punchline for every joke of the king and his ministers because it was easy for them to find obvious flaws in his appearance and exaggerate them to make an easy joke to laugh at. In the short story we can even see the king mocking Hop-Frog, asking him to drink wine to honor his friends and family back in his home country. According to Poe's description of the king

and his behavior, I would say that this is not uncommon occurrence on the court. This would be a prime example of how Poe planned his works – in his *Philosophy of Composition*, he admits that he plans everything in the plot even before he starts writing. He admits that this planning beforehand helps him to connect all the aspects of the story, which helps to build the suspense and creates well founded way to the grand finale of the plot and the story. Poe even went that far and criticized the usual common approach other writers use to create their plots. He claims that they only outline for themselves few main plot points and then try to fill in the blanks with dialogues between characters and descriptions, which makes their main plot points and even plot twists easy to spot for the reader many pages before the finale of the story.<sup>34</sup> With these two stories, Poe masterfully crafts the circumstances and setting to make the reader to get to know the characters, even just through hints or subtle implications. The reader is allowed to make his own opinion about them and then is shown that even the character you would describe as sympathetic and worth of your pity or compassion, can feel strong emotion and act on them – the main characters of these stories are either Hop-Frog, whose fate was too cruel not to feel for him or Montresor, whose original conflict and envy of Fortunato are very human, understandable and even relatable, not considering the fact that he decided to solve his problem by murder of his friend. Poe shows readers that even ordinary people like every single one of us can feel passionately about issues in his life, however, his characters took their feelings too far and that resulted in them destroying their lives and lives of the people around them. The author's points are clearly shown in his work, he makes the reader focus on the story and what he tries to express. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe admits that he considers passion to be one of the most important features which should be displayed in prose, whereas in his poem the main focus lies on the beauty and its effect on the reader. As mentioned, Poe put an emphasis on feelings which can be perceived as negative. One of them which was commonly occurring in his works is melancholy or grief. He often depicted death in his stories, using it as the climax of the story or, on the other hand, as the event which opens the story and leads to the events which Poe's work narrates.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," accessed on May 12, 2018, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/55749/55749-h/55749-h.htm#Philosophy>.

<sup>35</sup> Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition."

As mentioned, these stories have similar motives but the reader should feel differently about them. Reader's attention is grabbed by the motivation of the main characters and by their determination to achieve their desired state of their world, however, the reader cannot avoid the urge to judge these characters, even though Poe himself does not explicitly force the reader to do so. Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist who researches how people turn evil and is well known for his Stanford Prison Experiment, in his book *The Lucifer Effect* claims that every person believes that they are special, interestingly more often in cultures which nurture independent-oriented individuals, for example European countries or countries located in America, whereas countries focused more on collectives and communities such as the ones located in Africa or the Middle East.<sup>36</sup> This could be used as a proof that while Montresor is European and as mentioned, is full of himself, Hop-Frog's home country was probably located somewhere in the Middle East. The most important thing in Hop-Frog's life is his family and friends, including both Trippeta and his friends back in his home country. Even though these characters made similar decision, they consciously killed somebody but for different reasons, the reader cannot possibly say whether both of them or any of them are just evil. According to Zimbardo, it is not possible to determine how is the person is going to behave in a situation which is completely new to them. Additionally, he claims that people tend to believe that people are only fully good or fully evil, nothing in between. This, together with his hypothesis that all people are capable of everything under certain circumstances, regardless of their family background or social status<sup>37</sup>, helps to prove that both of Poe's characters from these stories need to be taken as humans, without determining whether they are good or evil by nature. As mentioned, their deeds were founded by different reason and therefore, we can assume that their motivations came from different places. Montresor decided to commit the murder because of his pride, in other words, his individuality. He does not care whether the community will suffer with the loss of Fortunato, he bases his decision on his desire, he focuses solely on himself and his needs. Whereas Hop-Frog's motivation for the homicide he committed comes from different place. The king's torment of Hop-Frog was based in exploiting his longing for his friends and family and in his desire to

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<sup>36</sup> Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* (UK: Rider, 2009), 5–6.

<sup>37</sup> Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 6–7.

return back home, which consequently later became Hop-Frog's motive to finally get revenge on his tormentors.

Using differences as the reason for bullying and even to justify such acts as murder is still a common occurrence to this day. Examples of this threatening behavior could be seen all the time throughout the history. These differences in something as essential as race or wealth build an easy wall between people, allowing one group to believe that they are superior to the other. After all, this became the main point of The Second World War. Zimbardo touches on these subjects in his book as well, using the situation between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. The Tutsi started genocide of Hutu just because the government marked them as a threat and emphasized the differences. For example, Tutsi are closer to Caucasian race, in other words, they look more European, which in their eyes made them better and more civilized than Hutu, whose appearance was more traditional. That was the reason why Tutsi people had better relationship with the colonialists, which then allowed them to get proper education and therefore widened the gap between the two.<sup>38</sup> As mentioned above, the main reason why Hop-Frog's life was so unbearable was his race and social status, which got exploited by the king. Those are typical things which trigger the aggressors to attack. In this case, the king took it as a sign that he could treat Hop-Frog as he liked, basically as if he was a piece of furniture. The reader could only theorize whether the king was oppressing the whole country or if he tried to conquer it and failed, being only able to capture few prisoners to bring back home. Another question which cannot be answered is whether the king limited his torment he inflicted upon his subject to be only mental or whether he also used any physical means to make them do what he wants and what he considered funny. This perfectly fits the notion that Caucasian nations believed that any other races were subordinate to them, as if they were animals. And if a person starts to believe that another human being is merely an animal, this notion allows them to treat the other person differently, with more cruelty. Hop-Frog decided to break this stereotype after he was pushed to his limits, punishing the king and his ministers for their behavior towards the slaves and at the same time, he made an effort to change his

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<sup>38</sup> Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 14.

status in the king's eyes to human again. Admittedly, his actions were too intense, even though it can be easily understood because of his past experiences.

In conclusion, Poe described very intense event and feelings but without any imminent judgement. He used his skilled writing to create a story which allowed the reader to get completely immersed, with interesting characters which might have been too intense for the real life but exactly what the story needed to progress and have an impact on the reader. Poe let the characters with vicious intents do as they like, without drawing any consequences for them. Both Montresor and Hop-Frog succeeded in their endeavor, even though Hop-Frog became basically an outlaw while Montresor's victim died quickly because of his asthma or possibly because of shock, without days of suffering in walled-off dungeon, which was according to Montresor a suitable punishment for Fortunato. Therefore, their endeavor can be considered to be accomplished only partly. However, Poe does not attempt to lecture the reader and make them a lesson, the characters do not pity their victims or seek forgiveness, they are content with how the events turned out in the end. Poe lets the reader to analyze what he made them feel, he does not force his readers to be better humans, he simply gently shows them certain extremes which happen in real life and allows his audience to come to the conclusion that they want to control themselves in order to not turn into the characters on their own.

## 2.2. The Appeal of Evil

This chapter deals with the appeal of evil to people. Why are people so mesmerized by evil? Even nowadays we can see people creating fan clubs for serial killers who were convicted of committing crimes which are too horrible to imagine. Easy example of this behavior could be how many people were rooting for Jiří Kájínek or even how many people can be counted as fans of Charles Manson – he even appeared at the cover of the Rolling Stone Magazine<sup>39</sup>. Since the societies started to form, people started to

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<sup>39</sup> Alexis Petridis, "Pop culture's dark obsession with Charles Manson – from Guns N' Roses to Mad Men," accessed on May 19, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/nov/20/charles-manson-pop-culture-dark-obsession-guns-n-roses-mad-men>.

contemplate the reason why evil even exists and whether there are any differences to evil deeds and whether or not they can be judged differently based on the reasoning behind them. For example, there is a difference in judgement of a deed if people take into account that the victim hurt the offender before the offender took action. In that case, the blame of the society is slightly shifted and the victim takes part of the blame, if not majority of it. As an example, can be even used Poe's *Hop Frog*, where we as readers do not judge Hop-Frog as harshly as Montresor for his revenge on the king because the king and his ministers used Hop-Frog as a toy to kick into just for their own enjoyment. Therefore, the reader feels more with Hop-Frog than they would do normally if he was not bullied by his victim beforehand.

When there is a crime committed, people become basically mesmerized by it and it becomes the most important piece of gossip there is. Some people could even get into a state where they cannot resist the urge to try recreating the criminal offence in order to become urban famous as well. Poe covered this phenomenon in his short story *The Imp of the Perverse*. This story was published for the first time in 1845. Even though the story is narrated in the first person, it is commenced the way reader would expect a scientific paper to begin. This approach to an introduction Poe used also in the story *The Premature Burial*, which was published just a year prior. Poe starts the story with describing Phrenology, popular pseudoscience which focuses on studying shape of person's skull and how it indicates their character.

In *The Imp of Perverse*, Poe uses his typical main character, who is the narrator of the story at the same time. Using quite emotionless way of introducing the story, the narrator then focuses more on his own story – he explains his compulsion which caused him to commit murder, phrasing his decision as if he had no choice, which is another typical feature of Poe's stories. Poe's way of writing could be taken as educational only if the reader would intend to take the story that way. He puts more meaning into the setting, the beauty of it, and its connection to the story, than to the evil act committed as the main plot point. It simply becomes one of the features, which together form a masterpiece that was not primarily intended to influence reader's opinion or even share Poe's attitude towards the concepts he uses in his stories.



However, during Poe's times, his stories were educational enough to be considered "safe to read" even for conservative, puritan readers. There was no vulgar content and his gruesome plots were simplified into percepts that should be followed by everyone. Moldenhauer explains that the plot of *The Imp of Perverse* could be summarized as "life should not be sacrificed to artistic perfectionism,"<sup>40</sup> which is one of the more frequent conclusions that could be drawn from Poe's short stories. As mentioned before, Poe's main characters often end up doomed by their actions, punished for the rest of their lives on the Earth, as well as beyond. According to Moldenhauer, this conclusion of the stories allowed even his potential puritan readers to enjoy the story. However, Poe himself would not be satisfied with this view of his stories. Moldenhauer explains that Poe believed in unity in literature: "a condition in which every portion of the work is indispensable for the 'effect' which the artist chooses to induce, and, at the same time, indispensable for the structural completeness, symmetry, 'proportion,' or 'harmony' of the composition."<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Poe uses many different tools to achieve his ideal story composition but all of them need to be used for a reason – to create a whole that works together and creates an art piece that exists to impress and not only to mentor the reader. As mentioned, *The Imp of Perverse* could be simply taken as a lecture on the topic of gaining property the illegal way, however, it is not its purpose. Poe carefully crafted the story to influence the reader's emotions but, at the same time, gave him a chance to form his own opinion either based on the facts laid out in the story or even based on the information and values the readers obtained previously in their everyday life. That is the reason why this short story starts in very impersonal, scientific way before the narrator moves on to the actual narration of what he had done and how his deed was uncovered. This allows the readers to challenge their own sense of morality and let themselves to be impressed by the story, even if it contains such gruesome images as murder in order to acquire a monetary gain. According to Moldenhauer, using moral sense, along with intellect and taste, was a crucial element to crafting a literary piece for Poe. The author used these three elements as pillars to base his work on. For Poe, his main goal he aimed to achieve with his stories was to create something everyone will deem beautiful, even though people have different tastes. Therefore, he valued his taste the most, using moral sense

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision," *PMLA*, vol. 83, no. 2 (May, 1968): 285.

<sup>41</sup> Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art," 286.

and intellect as subordinate tools only.<sup>42</sup> That means that Poe did not necessarily care about the moral of the story, he just used those elements as tools to create the story the way he deemed the most beautiful. That means that he did not aim to be educational or even truthful and accurate, he twisted the facts and ideas to fit into the mold he crafted in order to create something ideal. As mentioned, *The Imp of Perverse* begins with a description of Phrenology and by general facts about human behavior. This is a way for Poe to set the background for the more specific part – the reader will learn the facts that are essential for understanding the story, without the need to be educated in the field prior.

The main theme of the short story is people's urge to do something which can be harmful to them. The narrator calls it the imp of the perverse and tells his own story. The narrator explains that he thoroughly plotted murder in order to gain property of the victim. He spent many weeks contemplating different methods of murder and studying different cases and eventually he resolved his issue by using poisoned candle. He was prepared for every possible outcome and therefore he got what he desired. However, then he started to fear the possibility that he might get caught, so he tried to reassure himself by admitting that no one will know what he did – his crime could be exposed only if he confessed to it. This is the moment when the imp of the perverse took action – the narrator seemingly lost his mind, started sprinting through the streets and after people started chasing him, he collapsed and swiftly confessed everything he done, destroying his own fate. As mentioned, in *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe explains that in his opinion the writer of this genre is supposed to make the character show and act upon strong feelings – Poe's characters usually show melancholy, which then graduates into them tormenting themselves, determined or forced by their needs to destroy their lives.<sup>43</sup>

This short story is one of the ones where Poe narrates the story in the first person, from the point of view of a murderer who ended up confessing their actions to other people. Another story with the same premise is for example *The Tell-Tale Heart*, where

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<sup>42</sup> Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art," 286.

<sup>43</sup> Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition."

the main character confesses that he committed murder because he hallucinates the heartbeat of the victim while talking with the police. Charles Baudelaire claimed that because Poe was part of the nation that is focused only on itself, he was able to detect the natural evil which is present in every human being. Baudelaire explains that Poe shows that there is a mysterious force which drives the humans and which is the only way to explain certain actions and decisions the people make. Baudelaire also claims that these actions are attractive for the people just because they are evil and dangerous. He also elaborates in detail that Poe's so called perverse is the force because people commit evil actions towards other people as well as to towards themselves, which cannot be successfully explained by anybody. Baudelaire adds that this could be explained by Satan forcing humans to act, even though according to his and Poe's experience, that is the way God brings order to the world and punishes those who did not follow the rules. Moreover, Baudelaire also appreciates that Poe and his work doubts the typical state of mind that everybody at the time had. The people typically felt like they all were born good. Poe used his work to refute this notion, together with another one claiming that people are omnipotent.<sup>44</sup>

In this short story Poe puts an emphasis on the natural evil found in the person. He explains that even though scientists at that time focused more on God's plan with humanity and that was the main reason they learn about human organs, for example they claimed that God wanted people to eat and reproduce and consequently they discovered that humans indeed have sets of organs which are needed for these things. Poe argues whether it would not be more efficient to focus on people's behavior and needs instead of focusing on the assumptions we made about God's intentions with humankind. Poe does not doubt existence of God, even though he was able to see theodicy and the problem of God's and evil existence at the same time. However, he does not try to lecture his readers to be better Christians, he just states that the urge to commit evil deeds is elementary to people, the same way evil is elementary in this world. Poe explains that the urge in the person slowly turns into the need, which cannot be ignored and will consequently force the person to fulfill it by committing the action the person desired, even though they realize that it is absolutely forbidden in the society

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<sup>44</sup> Baudelaire, *Úvahy o některých současnících*, 280–281. (My translation)

to act like this. In *The Imp of Perverse*, the main character does feel the need to explain himself to the reader in order to not appear insane because he needs to justify his actions and their consequences for the society to understand the so called imp of perverse. The main character was able to fulfill his wish and inherited the property after he murdered the victim and was able to live contently for years, even though he should be feeling guilty because of the society he was raised with. In every community and society there is a common belief that young people need to respect and help their elders and parents, which he violated by his actions. He is able to use his property and live happily until he starts to doubt his safety from lawful consequences. From that moment, he cannot take his mind of the possibility of getting caught and therefore it starts to consume his sanity. From that moment, he was under control of the imp of perverse and therefore basically doomed. He reveals his actions to the public because he cannot stop himself and by that he makes himself the hated outcast of the society and also consequently, he exposed himself to legal consequences and therefore ended up in a cell awaiting with a death sentence. In the conclusion of the short story, the main character expresses his fear and worry about what would come next for him after the execution. This could be understood as a sign that the main character and the society he lives in are religious, probably Christian. The fear of possible afterlife and ending up in heaven shows that even though Poe was not exactly lecturing people about how they should behave, he still chose to foreshadow the reader the possibility that they can be punished for their sins after they die, which could be taken as an indicator that even though Poe normally uses uncommon actions considered as evil and extreme emotions just to make the reader invested and fascinated by the story, in *The Imp of Perverse*, he decided to propose to the reader the possibility that they can be judged for their actions not only by other humans but also they might end up in hell if they do not follow the rules created by society or religion.

Philip Zimbardo, a famous psychologist specializing in research of evil, claims in his book *The Lucifer Effect* that one of the reasons people are able to commit murder and other offences towards other human beings is that they somehow dehumanize the target of their actions. He uses soldiers in war as an example. It is an important part of their training to make them believe that they are the ones in right, whereas the enemy is wrong, evil and considered less than them. Not only the soldiers but also the public

needs to believe that the enemies are some kind of demons that are a serious threat towards the good values and beliefs which are ours and that the only way to keep our peace is to completely destroy the enemy and everything they stand for. However, according to him these explanations of the behavior the people exhibit are merely an afterthoughts, just to make them appear better and feel justified in front of the public and more importantly, themselves.<sup>45</sup> All of this can be seen in *The Imp of Perverse*, even though the main character is an individual instead of being a part of the army and his goals are more self-oriented than in the situation described by Zimbardo. He has a very strong urge to explain himself to the reader so he spent majority of the time he has to make the reader understand explaining Phrenology and all the possible occurrences of the imp, even though it will not make the reader's judgement any less harsh on him. The main character acts and talks as if he is strangely insensibly, as if he does not feel guilty about his deed at all, more accurately, as if he did not see his victim as human. Even though the victim could not be considered evil or demonic, he simply needed to get the victim out of the way. Therefore, he did not look left or right and decided to act on his need – he killed his relative even though he probably had a good relationship with him before. The victim became simply an obstacle, which needed to be taken care of.

The short story used in this segment is diametrically different from the first two. The main difference is not only its more academic approach to story-telling, more importantly, the tone of the story is completely different. To illustrate, in *The Cask of Amontillado*, the story is delivered the same way as *The Imp of Perverse*. It is narrated in the first person, the main characters committed a murder, except the character in this story confessed and is going to be punished for his actions. However, even though the character in this story seems very confident and content in his actions, in the final part of the story reveals his true emotions, which can only be characterized as fear and possible realization that there was another way to go, instead of the way the character decided to take. This short story is the only one which has indicated a regret and therefore in my opinion could be classified as more straightforward with Poe's intention to make the reader think about not only consequences of their deeds they will

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<sup>45</sup> Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 11.

face in the near future, but at the same time propose the possibility or remind them that their actions could influence them even after they die. Poe was a master of subtlety – he lets the reader to draw the connections themselves so he does not need to spell it out for them and instead of that he could focus all of his energy and genius to paint beautiful imagery and complex story without being too pressured to make intentionally his works into lesson. As we were able to see and as he mentioned in *The Philosophy of Composition*, he mainly focuses on the effect he could have on the reader using just such a short medium as a poem or short story, without forcing the reader to focus on more lengthy literary piece for extended period of time until the reader devours the whole work in one sitting or expecting them to remember all the nuances he put inside his story for a long time if they need to split their focus into more reading sessions.<sup>46</sup>

To conclude, Poe used very different approach than normally in this story. He started the story as an academic essay, making the character sound very rational and cohesive, slowly revealing his inner decay. His own logic does not seem faulty to him, he believes that his only mistake was the thought about getting captured, which allowed the Imp to appear and made him spill out his secret to everybody on the street. Therefore, he does not feel guilty, he feels more resigned and betrayed by the imp, because in his eyes, the imp was the one who destroyed his life. This is why he sound so desperate at the end of the story, while waiting for his death sentence.

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<sup>46</sup> Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition."

### 3 Conclusion

This bachelor thesis was focused on Edgar Allan Poe's work, mainly focused on the role of evil in his short stories *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Hop Frog* and *The Imp of Perverse*. The analysis of Poe's main characters and their traits showed us that all three of the main characters show incredible determination to achieve their goal when they set it for themselves, even though they are going to hurt somebody in the process. They all make a conscious decision to end another person's life for their gain, either materialistic or spiritual. As shown in the body of the thesis, the final outcomes for any of these three characters ended up completely different from each other. Montresor ended up partly fulfilling his wish of getting vengeance on Fortunato, however Fortunato coincidentally avoided the days of suffering Montresor prepared for him by dying because of his asthma or shock and therefore Montresor had to acquiesce to that result. Unfortunately, the readers did not get the closure whether the murderer was punished or not. Hop-Frog was able to get his revenge on his tormentors and subsequently punished the bystanders who did nothing to help him by forcing them to do nothing to help the king. His plan worked out brilliantly and therefore he was able to leave the court with his friend and presumably flee to their mother country, which would make his story the one with a happy ending, even though he technically did commit a crime and should have been punished for it. The most interesting outcome could be seen in *The Imp of Perverse*. The main character did get what he wanted and was able to kill his relative, however unlike the other two, he ended up punished for it because of his urge to confess. His story is the only one which explicitly states the concern about getting caught and about the punishment for the murder. He is also the one who tried to justify and explain his actions the most, spending majority of the story length describing the circumstances and his efforts to avoid being captured. Even after being captured, he still shows concern about what comes next for him, specifically asking what will happen next. This is a sign of a believing in post mortal life, or on the other hand, the fear of the possibility that there is not one.

This could be classified as the most obvious clue that Poe did not write his stories only to appease the readers aesthetically but that he also wanted to affect their

moral side and maybe even show them what are the consequences of the worst offence against another human being imaginable. Most of Poe's stories just slightly touch up on those topics, without explicitly stating anything, whereas *The Imp of Perverse* took step further and revealed that Poe did not only use his literary skills and his finished works to impress people and fill their imagination with shocking gruesome images that will scar them for life but at the same time that his intentions were to maybe help the society to become a little better. He showcased how easy it is for people to get carried away and become the characters they were terrified of.

Those analysis were based on the theoretical part, which explained how people define evil, how are different philosophers approaching the problem of evil and dealing with phenomenon of Theodicy, which is actually a part of the whole religion versus atheism conflict. Theodicy asks the question why God would allow the existence of evil if they are omnipotent. The question is simply answered by the theory that there is balance in everything and everyone has a little piece of evil inside of them. Hop-Frog is a living proof of that – he cares deeply about his friends back home and about Trippeta, he is capable of love, which is the purest human emotion imaginable. On the other hand, he was the one who tricked the king and his ministers into dressing up as orangutans and then let them burn to death swinging from the chandelier.

Another part of the bachelor thesis dealt with literary context of Poe's work, elementary characteristics and development of gothic genre and American Gothic, combining this knowledge with other aspects to create the complex analysis on the role of evil in Poe's literary works.



## 4 Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rolí zla v povídkách Edgara Allana Poea. Korpus této práce tvoří tři vybrané povídky Sud vína Amontilladského, Skokan a Démon zvrácenosti. Tato práce je rozdělena na teoretickou a praktickou část.

První kapitola teoretické části se zabývá zlem. Definuje, co přesně lidé považují za zlo, jak obvykle přistupují k jeho konání, a hlavně jak existence zla zapadá do kontextu s náboženskou kulturou. Velká část kapitoly se věnuje problému teodicey, fenomenální otázce vznesené filozofy, která se zabývá existencí Boha a zla v jedné realitě. Někteří tvrdili, že pokud připustíme existenci zla, vyvrácíme tím zároveň existenci Boha, nebo alespoň vyvrácíme jeho vševědoucnost a všemohoucnost.

Další část teorie se věnuje literárnímu kontextu Poeových prací. Nastíní historické události, které mohly ovlivnit Poeův život a také charakterizuje gotický žánr a jeho odnož, Americkou gotiku. Tato část nastíní spojení mezi středověkou architekturou a literárním žánrem, jehož autoři byli fascinováni temnými časy středověku a tajemstvími, která se zdají být uchovávaná ve zdech gotických staveních. Tato kapitola vysvětluje základní znaky tohoto žánru a nejčastější témata, která se v něm objevují.

V praktické části jsou rozebrány hlavní body děje tří vybraných povídek a analýza jejich chování a povah. Dále se věnuje jejich pohnutkám, důvodům, proč se rozhodli spáchat skutek který spáchali a následkům, kterým musí čelit. Z této analýzy vychází, že Poe věnoval většinu svého talentu vytváření estetických obrazů, hledal krásu ve skutečích, které jsou většinou společnosti považované za příliš drastické a naprosto nevhodné k zobrazení. Jedna z vybraných povídek ale dokazuje, že i Poe občas využil svého vlivu a literárního talentu i jiným způsobem a zaměřil se také na etickou otázku skutků které s oblibou využíval ve své tvorbě jako základního stavebního kamene.

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